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TWO TRACKS IN THE WILDERNESS

Are the Sandinistas serious? That's the question of the day in Central America. For the past several weeks—come to think of it, ever since the American invasion of Grenada—they have been running around doing conciliatory things. The list is long and unimpressive: (1.) They have been sending Cubans home in droves, although it's not clear whether these Cubans were teaching Nicaraguans how to read or how to fire an AK47, or whether they were returning home on their regular Christmas rotation. (2.) The Sandinistas have ostentatiously told some Salvadoran guerrilla leaders to set up headquarters elsewhere, although it is not clear whether the infrastructure of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front has really had to evacuate Managua. (3.) They have made a conciliatory gesture to the Church, though it was "an exchange of views, nothing more," according to Reverend Bismarck Carballo, the spokesman for the Church hierarchy; as for government censorship of Catholic radio stations or the ban on live transmission of Sunday mass, "There has been no progress on any of these points," Reverend Carballo says. (Even more disturbing is the fact that the Sandinista leadership ever sought to suppress the Church, the most powerful institution in Nicaragua and at first sympathetic to the revolution; it is an index of how intent the top leadership has been upon controlling any possible rival center of power.) (4.) Censorship on *La Prensa* has been relaxed, though there has been no real extension of freedom of the press; *La Prensa* remains the last independent source of news in the country. (5.) The government announced that it was pardoning all Miskito Indians convicted of political offenses, and claimed that it had released 307 from prison. But according to officials of the Independent

Permanent Commission for Human Rights, no list of those freed has been issued, and religious workers in the Miskito area believe other Miskitos remain in jail despite the decree. "Speaking conservatively, we believe there are at least fifteen hundred prisoners in Nicaragua who have never seen a judge," said Marta Patricia Baltodano, national coordinator of the commission. (6.) The government offered to antigovernment guerrillas amnesty and a restoration of the right to vote and to be elected, but made sure to exclude all but the humblest *contra* foot soldier, which makes the amnesty very partial, and the part about "the right to be elected" empty.

As you can see, we're skeptical. Others are not. *The Boston Globe*, for example, has decided that "heeding advice from Fidel Castro and warnings from Mexico and other Latin American democracies as well as the European states, the Sandinistas have shown that they are ready to accept nonalignment and pluralism in order to preserve their revolution." Pluralism? A junta holds a monopoly of power and rules by decree. Some of these decrees give the appearance of moderating repression of formerly independent, in some cases revolutionary, sectors of society. These measures are characterized by the regime as favors. (The amnesty decree declares itself to be an act of "revolutionary generosity [by] the Junta of the National Reconstruction Government.") When that happens in Chile it's not called pluralism, and rightly so. It is no less so in Nicaragua.

Pluralism means a dispersion of power. The Sandinistas announced that on February 21 they will announce the date for national elections in 1985. There has been no indication that they will be willing to cede any power in

these elections—which is what real, as opposed to sham, elections are about—or that opposition groups will be permitted adequate access to media and other resources necessary to ensure a fair competition. Until that is made clear, talk of pluralism is premature. Those who talk of the virtues of real power-sharing in places like Beirut and San Salvador might pause a bit before declaring these at-best ambiguous Sandinista promises to be proof of pluralism.

As for nonalignment, Managua proposes to send home foreign military advisers and reduce outside military aid if its neighbors will do the same. This is not quite as equitable a deal as it appears. The Sandinista Army is by far the largest and most powerful in the region. It is a threat to all of its neighbors, not only Honduras and El Salvador, but Costa Rica too. And how would withdrawal of Nicaraguan and Cuban support to the guerrillas in El Salvador be verified? The Sandinistas deny giving any support in the first place. American support for the regime in El Salvador is official and verifiable, and its withdrawal would almost certainly mean military victory for the left.

IN SHORT, what has come out of Managua in the last several weeks are good signs. But good only in relation to the previous situation: suppression of the Church, repression of the opposition, severe strictures on the press, and war on the Miskito Indians. The direction of movement is good, but the distance thus far traveled minimal. And they are still only signs. The announcements have been made with great publicity, but real action is hard to perceive. When "the government refuses to provide a list of people that it's holding, or even to say how many prisons there are and where they are located," according to officials of the Independent Permanent Commission for Human Rights, what exactly does amnesty, let alone pluralism or nonalignment, mean?

Are the Sandinistas serious? The most that we can say now is that they are scared. The carrot held out by President Carter failed to moderate their drive toward a one-party state; the verbal stick employed by the Reagan Administration for the first year or so appears only to have accelerated that drive; the recent two-by-four of guerrilla war, American troops in Honduras, and the invasion of Grenada appears to have gotten their attention. A wise policy now for the United States would be to keep it and test it.

That makes for a two-track policy. First, apply the pressure that brought them to their current conciliatory mood. This is no time to let up. Second, find out what they mean by these signals. Are they truly ready to trade the Salvadoran revolution for their own? Are they willing to abide by the Contadora principles of noninterference and nonintervention in the affairs of their neighbors? Not only has the regime in Managua been supporting (and denying its support of) the insurgency in El Salvador, it has been stirring up trouble in Honduras and even in Costa Rica. Last month a column of a hundred guerrillas trained and

sent from Nicaragua moved across the border to begin a guerrilla war in Honduras. A remarkably successful Honduran Army operation completely destroyed this unit. But the demonstration of Nicaragua's potential for mischief in the area was unmistakable.

Testing the intentions of the Sandinistas means more than merely accepting a promise of nonintervention or nonalignment. It means pressing in any negotiation with the Sandinistas—and now is the time to begin negotiating—for true pluralism within the country. Opening up the political system in Nicaragua is not merely a good in itself; it is the *only* real guarantee that the regime will keep to its external commitments. Given Nicaragua's regional activities, given the history elsewhere of Leninist promises of noninterference and nonaggression in the affairs of neighbors, one has reason to doubt that an agreement signed with such a regime will last beyond the current emergency. The best guarantee for nonaggression is the presence within the Nicaraguan government of elements who have no interest in spreading subversion. Pluralism in Nicaragua would not only be good for Nicaragua, it would be good for all of Central America. It would be the only reliable guarantor of nonintervention.

Which is why the proposal made by a group of Nicaraguan rebel leaders meeting in early December with Special Envoy Richard Stone in Panama is a good one. They declared their willingness to enter into negotiations with the government for free elections and an open political system. If they are willing to stand for elections, why aren't the Sandinistas? Particularly since the Sandinistas (and American political pilgrims like Senator Paul Tsongas) repeatedly tell us that they have overwhelming popular support in the country. If these rebels are indeed Somocistas, they shouldn't stand a chance in any open electoral contest.

As expected, the Managua regime rejected out of hand the suggestion of negotiations. Foreign Minister Miguel d'Escoto said, "We want to talk to the puppeteers, not the puppets." Mere dependence on foreign assistance seems to us not to delegitimize a guerrilla movement. (If so, the National Liberation Front in South Vietnam should never have been allowed to a negotiating table.) Nor is it true that the guerrilla leaders who met with Mr. Stone are all Somocistas. No doubt there are former guardsmen in the military command of the major group, the F.D.N., but it is hard to level the charge of *Somocismo* against another group, M3 (the Third Way), led by a former Sandinista agriculture minister; or at the Miskito Indians, one of the groups to join the call for elections and pluralism.

The Sandinistas object that the revolution is irreversible. We should be willing to grant that principle immediately, while at the same time denying that Comandante Daniel Ortega has the right to claim, "*la revolution c'est moi*." The revolution may be irreversible, but the same should not be said of a one-party state; or repression of Church, press, and political opposition; or Committees for the Defense of the Revolution on every block.

It is also important to remember that the kind of democ-

racy and pluralism demanded by the guerrillas is not a North American import. What is being demanded is precisely the promise of democracy and pluralism made by the Sandinistas before they achieved power, and which they have systematically betrayed.

This is the age of two-track policies: pressure and negotiation. Our hope is that this Administration, which has certainly not labored under any illusions that negotiation is enough, will similarly not succumb to the illusion that pressure is enough. Even the C.I.A. concludes that the guerrilla armies are in no position to overthrow the Sandinistas. Unless the Administration is prepared to engage the United States in a brutal, bloody, and long ground war in the area, there is no alternative to a policy of negotiation and pressure. And to negotiate a settlement which yields a more plural and open Nicaraguan society is infinitely preferable to an American-backed regime fighting Sandinistas in the hills, which would be the likely and terrible outcome of even a *successful* one-track military policy.

A PARALLEL POLICY in El Salvador has also attempted to keep itself on two tracks: military support for the government, and American pressure for economic and social reforms and human rights improvements. With President Reagan's pocket veto of the requirement that every six months the Administration certify human rights improvements in El Salvador, one of those tracks has been abruptly lost. This development will not only be a great blow to the victims of human rights abuses in El Salvador (see "Behind the Death Squads," by Christopher Dickey, *TNR*, December 26); it is a threat to El Salvador itself and to American hopes for the country.

The loss of any instrument to restrain the brutal death squads in El Salvador is to be lamented. The Administration protests that it has made its unhappiness with the death squads extremely evident, with tough statements from Undersecretary of Defense Fred Iklé (one of the staunchest supporters of current policy in El Salvador), from Deputy Secretary of State Kenneth Dam, from the new U.S. ambassador, Thomas Pickering. And the State Department spokesman who explained why Roberto d'Aubuisson was refused a visa to the United States (in an evenhanded gesture to balance the banning of one of the Sandinista leaders, Tomás Borge) for the first time explicitly referred to his involvement with death squads.

Nonetheless, certification was an additional form of pressure, and now it is gone. It was perhaps the worst mechanism for exerting pressure on the Administration, but it was better than any of the rest. It was the worst because it allowed Congress to snipe at Administration policy without taking responsibility for the consequences of its own opposition. Thus critics protested that the Administration was disingenuously claiming at previous certification sessions that progress was being made on human rights; but would they then have been prepared for the total cutoff of aid that is required by the legislation? Would they be prepared to accept responsibility for the consequences of such an action, including a leftist take-

over? And what of the human rights situation *then*? Experience in Vietnam and elsewhere gives us little reason to believe that such an outcome makes for improvement in human rights. Still, this kind of pressure is better than the rest, because the threat of cutting off aid is one of the few types of persuasion to which Mr. d'Aubuisson and his gang are susceptible. Officially renouncing the threat sends an unfortunate signal.

Secretary of State George Shultz has admitted that he would not have been able to certify improvements in human rights at the next scheduled session in January. There has been an increase in death squad killings in the last few months. If the legislation had not been vetoed, and Secretary Shultz was not able to certify improvements in human rights, he would have had only one of two choices: either to cut off aid to the government in El Salvador, or to invoke the national security waiver which forces the United States to admit that for geopolitical reasons it no longer binds itself to human rights criteria. That, in effect, is what Mr. Schultz has done. Yet alternatives are not easy to devise. More pressure on the government, yes. More attempts to undercut Mr. d'Aubuisson and prevent his accession to power in the coming election, yes. But the only real answer to political murder in El Salvador is an American takeover of the government. To do in El Salvador what we did with the thugs in Grenada: seize the country and throw them out. Who's for that?

It would be best to remind the Salvadorans every six months that they may lose everything—meaning their critical American support—if they continue to permit death squads to operate. Even without such a threat, it is obvious that the more such killings continue, the less chance there is for any center to form, and for any moderate government ever to survive. The government is losing the war with the guerrillas on the left and with the killers on the right. We may soon be relieved of our moral dilemmas about saving such a government. There may soon be nothing left to save.

NOTEBOOK

□ DAMNED IF THEY DO AND DAMNED IF THEY DON'T. There is reason to believe that the military and political screws the Administration is turning on Fidel Castro's allies in the region are beginning to work. The Grenadian invasion and the Nicaraguan imbroglio may have Mr. Castro thinking again. Still, there is a kind of American conservative thinking that refuses to take yes for an answer. For example: Lee Lescaze's analysis of the situation in Surinam in *The Wall Street Journal* of December 7 makes you wonder what exactly will satisfy these proud critics of Mr. Castro. You will recall that Surinam was the scene of one of the most dramatically good consequences of the intervention in Grenada. Colonel Desi Bouterse, a dictator and a Marx-